

# Dialogical Ecofeminist Perspectives in “The Moths” by Helena María Viramontes and “Woman Hollering Creek” by Sandra Cisneros

Imelda Martín-Junquera

Universidad de León/GIECO-Franklin Institute (UAH), Spain.

---

## Abstract

This article analyzes two well-known short stories by two prominent Chicana writers, namely Helena María Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros, from an ecofeminist perspective. It is my aim to approach both texts having in mind previously published analyses, and to introduce an innovative theoretical frame that contemplates literary texts, women and nature as being in constant conversational relationships. These dialogical relationships subvert the traditional domination of nature promoted by patriarchal cultures, which set the human being, especially the male representative, as superior to other living entities and as the only one with “agency,” thus rendering the rest as passive. Women, traditionally associated with nature because of their reproductive and nurturing qualities, have been discriminated and identified with the passive and submissive attitude attributed to nature as well as other ethnic and sexual minorities. Since the 1980s and 1990s, however, Chicana writers have been attempting to provide agency to Chicana women and the natural elements they portray in their narratives and poetry. A very clear example is represented in Viramontes’ “The Moths,” where even the title states the importance of the little insects in the story as well as that of the three generations of women whose lives intersect in the narrative. Cisneros’ “Woman Hollering Creek” deals with a parallel story of submission and resistance in which a dialogical relationship with the river and the surrounding nature serves to provide agency to the protagonist.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, nature, reproduction, abuse.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i3.7547>

---

The following pages deal with the intersection of ecology and gender as a valid category of analysis for the short stories “The Moths” by Helena María Viramontes and “Woman Hollering Creek” by Sandra Cisneros. The two Chicana writers deal with the problematic lives of women in the Southwest of the U.S., women who must reconcile their upbringing in traditional Mexican families with the accommodation to an American environment, which they are forbidden to explore since they cannot abandon the realm of the household as victims of the patriarchal abuse exerted on them by their fathers and/or husbands. Both stories are situated in the space where class, race, gender and nature intersect. In *Feminism on the Border* (2000), Sonia Saldívar-Hull undertakes a deep analysis of both stories from a feminist and postcolonial perspective considering the interaction of the two critical frameworks, but failing to include the ecological point of view, which I attempt to incorporate within this brief study along with several philosophical and grassroots approaches from the environmental justice movement, in order to establish the dialogical relationship that Patrick Murphy started applying to literary texts more than two decades ago and that is still valuable and relevant. Saldívar-

Hull bases her proposal on the recovery of indigenous traditions as crucial for these women to advance and mature in a hostile environment when you are born female. She centers her analysis of “The Moths” in the relevance of the learning that the grandmother transmits to her granddaughter in terms of alternative indigenous knowledge. Saldívar-Hull comments:

The grandmother’s ties to indigenous culture no longer valued in an urban setting are represented by the images of women planting herbs, flowers and vegetables. What the Abuelita passes on to the girl is the appreciation of a heritage in which the earth itself is a source of spirituality as well as a counterhegemonic reclamation of a discarded indigenous culture. (134)

I contemplate the relevance of the presence of nature under this same light: the river, the garden and the moths lend their wings to make a healing lotion. I regard, in sum, the environmental impact on the lives of Cleófilas and the teenage protagonist in “The Moths” as the most crucial elements of improvement and radical change in the lives of the protagonists. However, in my opinion, the turn to indigenous tradition and history does not constitute the main pillar to sustain the radical change and liberation these women need to undergo in their lives. On the contrary, these women must confront a tradition and a history of social, religious and gender impositions, both indigenous and colonial, that have functioned as oppressive elements reminding the protagonists that the place of a woman is next to her husband, disregarding the abuses that he may commit against her. Thus, I defend that their successful liberation from patriarchal confinement has more to do with the dialogical relationship that is established throughout both narratives between the protagonists and several elements of nature, as well as with their opening to social and political activism through sorority: the grandmother and the granddaughter constitute an alternative to the traditional nuclear family, and Cleófilas finds in Grace’s and Felice’s cooperation the support required for her final escape crossing the creek. The key concept to overcome the patriarchal and colonial dominance is represented by the connections the women craft among themselves and with the environment. Thus, the ecofeminist analysis completes the intention of both Viramontes and Cisneros when their protagonists find a way out of their confinement and through the closeness they cultivate with nature as represented, for example, in the creek, the moths and/or the garden. The presence of gardens and the symbolism of plants and flowers, incorporated by Viramontes and Cisneros in these narratives, help alleviate the sorrows of the protagonists and provide a setting of refuge from the suffocating reality of their everyday life. Even though this simple statement may seem essentialist, Val Plumwood affirms that “the association of women with nature and men with culture or reason can still be seen as providing much of the basis of the cultural elaboration of women’s oppression in the West, of the particular form that it takes in the western context, and that is still of considerable explanatory value” (11).

Following on the theory of intersectionality, proposed by the feminist activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, Plumwood adds the component of nature to the combination of factors that sanction female oppression and blames the abuse, exerted on women, on the

birth of hierarchical structures that deem men as the center of creation and place them at the top of the species pyramid. Plumwood's argument reckons "Western construction of human identity as 'outside' nature" (2). Viramontes and Cisneros present models of Chicana women, heiresses of their Mexican-American cultural traditions, female role models, who must submit to their fathers and/or husbands in the Judeo-Christian, patriarchal tradition. This double submission of their minds and bodies works to eliminate agency for women and turns them into a property, objectifies them and lowers their status to the level allowed to farm animals, and generally assigns them with inferiority within their culture. It is not casual, then, that all these women have suffered domestic abuse, and violence has been exerted on them by their fathers or husbands. Ecofeminism, in Plumwood's words, provides a clear explanation of this submission and the tools to counteract it:

Ecological feminism tells us that it is no accident that this world is dominated by men. If we are women, we have as a group an interest in escaping our ancient domination. We women also have an interest, which we share with other living creatures, and among them with men, in a sound and healthy planet, in sound, healthy and balanced ecosystems and in a sustainable and satisfying way of living on the earth." (7)

Cultural constructions of gender, like the ones that can be found in Chicano literature and are denounced by Chicana writers in the two short stories, are based on the exploitation of female and nature reproduction. In this androcentric world, women's value resides in their capacity for reproduction, for having children and providing offspring. One of the main tenets of ecofeminism consists of the attempt to break this exhaustive control that is imposed on human reproduction. Ecofeminism cares about the conditions in which reproduction takes place, and explores the extent to which human inequality is based on these relations of reproduction and on how the female gender is exploited to obtain a profit.

Property rights on women are exerted with violence, like the story Cisneros tells in "Woman Hollering Creek" about Maximiliano, a man who kills his wife, when she appears at the bar with a mop to bring him back home. Whether the story is true or belongs to the man's imagination remains unimportant since what really matters is the fact that, apart from denigrating her, he looks for the support of other men to mock her anger and disappointment in him. Every time he tells the story, everybody laughs at the event and applauds the man: "Maximiliano who was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl when she came at him with a mop. I had to shoot, he had said—she was armed" (52). Similarly, the protagonist of "The Moths" moves to her grandmother's house to help her, when her family laughed at her for not being able to fulfill domestic tasks: "My hands were too big to handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery and I always pricked my fingers or knotted my colored threads time and time again while my sisters laughed and called me bull hands with their cute waterlike voices" (27). Her big

hands, however, resist domination and imposition, acting diligently in her grandmother's garden and orchard.

Masculine identity, according to Plumwood and several other feminist theorists of non-violence that she quotes, is linked to "aggression against fellow humans, especially women, as well as against nature" (30). In "Woman Hollering Creek," Cleófilas is taken "across her father's threshold" to *el otro lado* (43). She is literally sold by her father to her husband and uprooted from the environment where she grew up. Initially, she was really hopeful for her future as a married woman since her family home was a place where she was in charge of all the work around the household, as a caretaker for her six brothers.

The day Don Serafín gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to take Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández as his bride, across her father's threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town en el otro lado—on the other side—already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to the chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints. (43)

Cleófilas is a clever girl and good with her sewing machine, and Juan Pedro, her husband, has a very important job. According to Cleófilas, having many children means to be blessed, so she does not consider her pregnancies as a burden. On the contrary, it is her job to get married and have children, while Juan Pedro's is to earn money for the family. When she moves with Juan Pedro north of the border, she only changes countries and not occupation because she will continue acting as the primary caretaker for her husband and now for her child. She is the only woman in a world of men, in a masculine dominated world, whose rules she ignores completely. In the world she inhabited before marrying, women and men spent their time in different activities: "There was a women's world separated from the men's world and they did 'girls' things' trying to be as beautiful as possible for their lovers or husbands pain all sweet, somehow" (45).

Contrary to Saldívar-Hull's suggestion of sticking to tradition in order to find liberation from colonization, questioning and contesting the foundations of the cultural borders of the Southwest work as strategies for Chicana writers to overcome this patriarchal abuse exerted on them. A pioneer of change, Gloria Anzaldúa revealed in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1986), where she maps the land *mestizas/os* inhabit: in the geographical, the spiritual and the psychological spaces among others. She also maps the space of abuse sanctioned by patriarchy, which places the border as a hierarchy of inhabitants, where the unit of the family becomes the center. For Anzaldúa, family is understood in the most rancid and nuclear terms, disregarding the bonds of affection and unity that govern other familial relationships that may inspire more dialogical encounters as the ones Viramontes and Cisneros announce and foster in their narratives.

While Viramontes creates an alternative family between the protagonist and her grandmother simply called “Abuelita,” Cisneros establishes bonds among women that go beyond traditional Christian families and explores the realm of lesbianism, echoing Anzaldúa’s *atravesados*<sup>1</sup> who finally find a legitimate place in “Woman Hollering Creek.” The connection with nature transforms family relationships and gives rise to dialogical encounters where women finally succeed in transcending their prescribed roles of domesticity and submission. Both Viramontes and Cisneros propose alternatives to the domination of nature and women: freedom of action and agency. They also incorporate in their stories an alternative to hierarchical, anthropological classifications, an ideal heterarchical order, where all species and women along with the sum total of the human kinds enjoy the same rights and benefits. Heterarchy against hierarchy highlights plurality within a system without dominant/subordinate ranking. Murphy settles the “hierarchy vs. heterarchy” confrontation in the following statement: “A heterarchical viewpoint can recognize bio-gender differences between women and men as well as ‘feminine’ traits in men and ‘masculine’ traits in women without falling prey to the socio-gender, hierarchical sex-typing rampant in our contemporary culture” (67).

As an example of this connection, we can observe how Cleófilas establishes a relationship of fascination with the *arroyo* (her object of desire) that is named after what she does not dare to do: “holler” and run away from a reality that suffocates her. This fascination goes along with the journey towards liberation that she will undertake since it starts the moment she crosses the physical border to settle as a married woman and right before Juan Pedro crosses the border of abuse towards her: “Pain or rage, Cleófilas wondered when she drove over the bridge the first time as a newlywed and Juan Pedro had pointed it out. La Gritona, he had said, and she had laughed. Such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (47).

The name of the creek reminds her of freedom, of the enormous possibilities that would await her if only she could step forward and break with the traditional Catholic education she has received, education that ties her tight to her husband. The creek marks the boundaries of happiness because Dolores and Soledad live on its banks; two women who, like Cleófilas, have suffered the consequences of a life of patriarchal domination. Both have had husbands and children at some time in their lives, but they all passed away too soon. Dolores and Soledad embody with their names Cleófilas’ agony as much as their own suffering. They predict the future that awaits her if she stays with her abusive husband, instead of taking the opportunity that is given to her to run away and leave behind all the pain and loneliness she has been experiencing in her married life.

Dolores takes time in her garden to preserve her contact with nature and grow sunflowers and roses that she will take to her family graves. It is striking that Cisneros

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Anzaldúa, *los atravesados* are the inhabitants of borderlands, of liminal spaces situated both in physical or mental places; “in short, those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (3).

compares the red color of the roses with menstrual flow, maybe nostalgically thinking of a time when Cleófilas, Dolores and Soledad did not suffer the imposition of their husbands because they were innocent girls, not having bloomed yet. The blood that runs along Cleófilas' lip, when Juan Pedro hits her, is compared to an orchid, a flower that often times does not receive the care that it needs, the same as Cleófilas: "But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood" (47).

*El arroyo de la Gritona* acquires relevance as a character, as the crossing point, as the challenge and the embodiment of La Llorona, who calls Cleófilas to rebel against her husband. La Gritona—a creek with a female name, identifying craziness, hysteria within women—makes Felice, who finally helps Cleófilas to escape, holler top lung and establish bonds of communication with the creek. Felice screams loud, resists oppression and tries to make Cleófilas understand that she has to rebel against her condition, to subvert the terms of her relationship and abandon her abusive husband: "For women the real task of liberation is not equal participation or absorption in such a male dominant culture, but rather subversion, resistance and replacement" (Plumwood 30).

Contrary to the confinement to which these women are submitted to in their own homes, they rejoice in the open space of nature, the amplex of the garden and the creek with which they identify completely. In the story, the creek becomes a heroic presence of escape from abuse and oppression. Forbidden to have a public life, these women remain in the private and mostly solitary realm of its banks. In fact, Cleófilas complains about her dependence on men: "Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands! Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you are rich enough to own, allowed to drive your own car" (50). In the two short stories, houses are metaphorical of abuse, of enclosure, of lack of freedom. And the women are not owners of the spaces they inhabit, which is also why they have to go outside, to run away from the confinement of marriages that asphyxiate them and turn them into insecure and dependent persons. The girl in "The Moths" is assigned to take care of her grandmother because her own mother cannot take time away from her husband or she would be beaten and vexed by him. Men, in the two narratives, appear as brutes, but, at the same time, Viramontes and Cisneros understand that they belong to a culture where authority has traditionally been exerted through violence, at least since the arrival of colonization to which Anzaldúa blames *machismo*. Cisneros compares the men at the bar with "dogs chasing their own tails before lying down to sleep, trying to find a way, a route, an out, and—finally—get some peace" (48).

The role of religion in the relationship between men and women is one of conscious oppression in the two short stories. Both protagonists live in hostile environments, where their rights are constantly ignored, and they must follow certain role models of behavior imposed by the male figures of the household. In the case of the narrator of "The Moths," as the girl refuses to accompany her mother and sisters to religious services to learn how to be submissive, her father locks her in the house, misunderstanding her rebellion completely and taking it as a proof of disrespect towards his authority: "That was one of Apá's biggest complaints. He would pound his hands on

the table, rocking the sugar dish or spilling a cup of coffee and scream that if I didn't go to mass every Sunday to save my goddam sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period" (29).

Among the religious icons that have recurrently oppressed women in Chicano culture, Virgin Mary in the figure of the Guadalupe Virgin acquires upmost importance in Chicana/o culture. Tey Diana Rebolledo works with the duality "virgin/puta," "curandera/bruja" in *Women Singing in the Snow* (1995) to recuperate the original values of indigenous traditions, where the binary oppositions were complementary and not exclusionary. "The Moths" plays with these binary oppositions, breaking the borders and initiating a new liminal position in which Abuelita becomes the martyr, an old dying body, but also an object of admiration, of praise that challenges Catholic religion. The image of the Pietà holding Jesus, appears subverted in the final image of the girl when she submerges the grandmother in the bathtub and cleanses her. The dead body of Abuelita provides the answer to the eagerness of her granddaughter to return to the maternal womb, to the gynocentered tradition that was denied to her and her sisters, as well as to her mother before her, after they were born. By cleaning the parts of the body, also implied in giving birth and rejoicing in this act, the protagonist enacts the triumph of motherhood and gynocratic relationships. The loveliness of this act also transforms the old, wrinkled body into a beautiful one, a body that becomes absolutely empowered through the ritual. The lack of signs of affection among the three generations of women, the protagonist, her mother and the narrator, is compensated with a display of mourning rituals that the girl undertakes with her grandmother, preparing her ceremoniously for the afterlife with loving gestures. She constantly repeats, "I never kissed her" (29-30), so as to highlight the change in her attitude after she discovers the secrets of abuse both her mother and grandmother had been hiding from her. They had been acting as fearful of showing love between them, probably to avoid being punished for it.

In their short stories, both Viramontes and Cisneros work to break traditional, literary genre conventions in nature writing, to turn them into feminine models of writing nature, and to challenge the opposition between human beings and non-animated nature. It is very easy to fall in an essentialist loop that centers in reproducing scenes of women in contact with nature or living outside civilization, enhancing their value as relationships of communication. But that is not the aim of these writers as they explore the ways of interaction between human beings and the environment in relation to the uses and expressions of tradition. The two Chicana authors show how the contradictory positions of traditional knowledge and women's liberation movement help their women characters gain self-confidence, grow as powerful human and natural beings, and encounter an exit from their suffering by escaping acceptance and submission.

Refusing to reproduce the tasks that submit women to the domestic realm or hollering top lung—when crossing the bridge that separates oppression from freedom—

represents strategies of resistance to patriarchal domination. These significant actions speak for ecofeminist fights for equality and for the elimination of the equation women/nature to undermine both. Thus, Felice feels the urge to scream when she drives Cleófilas and her son, Juan Pedrito, away from the reach of the abusive husband and father: “Pues, look how cute. I scared you two, right? Sorry. Should’ve warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know Woman Hollering. Pues, I holler. She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed” (55).

Plumwood affirms that, “[k]ey aspects of environmental critiques are centered on the way that control over and exploitation of nature contributes to, or is even more strongly linked to, control over and exploitation of human beings” (13). The return to nature proves liberating for both protagonists: working the garden and hollering at a creek provide strength and courage to abandon a painful past, and show enthusiasm to start anew. They, finally, escape a biological destiny that Plumwood explains as, “women [who] are systematically backgrounded and instrumentalised as housewives, as nurses and secretaries, as colleagues and workmates” (21). Women have also historically been denied access to scientific knowledge of their own bodies for the sake of domination or submission (Murphy 42). As a reaction towards this lack of information, towards the knowledge denied to women, Viramontes gives a detailed account of the old, wrinkled and deceased body of Abuelita to give it entity, importance, and to highlight its beauty, so often hidden and concealed from sight because of absurd prudery.

I returned to towel the creases of her stretch-marked stomach, her sporadic vaginal hairs, and her sagging thighs. I removed the lint from between her toes and noticed a mapped birthmark on the fold of her buttock. The scars on her back, which were as thin as the life lines on the palms of her hands made me realize how little I really knew of Abuelita. (31)

The female body, then, is finally contemplated as a site of resistance for Abuelita, who carries the marks of abuse on her body. At the same time, the barren body, unable to bear children, becomes despised and it stands as a body that refuses to fulfill traditional female duties, a body that rebels against masculine oppression, just as the hands of the granddaughter portrayed as enormous in her refusal to serve her father, to accept submission. The women who resist traditional ways of patriarchy are often found weaving links with the more-than-human natural world, thus escaping anthropocentric views and opening minds to alternative knowledge. The moths themselves invite to break with the past, to erase old traditions: they devour ancient fabrics and books in the promise of new beginnings, as when they escape from the dead body of Abuelita and fill the room in which her body is being prepared for mourning. With their ephemeral character and also by being nocturnal insects, moths signal the afterlife, but, at the same time and because of their fixation with approaching the light, they also bring along the promise of a better world after death. Their transformation from being caterpillars to becoming winged insects equals the personal growth the protagonist undergoes, while



taking care of her grandmother, and the epiphany she experiences upon the discovery of the abuse suffered by the old woman. Like moths, which are contemplated in popular culture with disgust unlike butterflies that awake admiration, an old woman dying inspires less interest than men or young fertile women, who can be identified more easily with more likable living beings. In an interview to Cary Cordova about the importance of oral history, Santa Barraza mentions the relationship between butterflies and men, a relationship that exists in many legends present in Chicana/o folklore:

I read about the men when they were—died in battle that when they died their spirits became butterflies if they were warriors and that their spirits were butterflies and that they went to a certain level in the heaven and that's where they dwelled and—and then I also read that a similar situation would occur with women. (n.p.)

Connecting butterflies with men could give the final answer to the association Cisneros makes between moths and women, but a little bit further in the interview, Barraza states that women who die at childbirth, transform into butterflies because they have somehow struggled and battled for their lives and their children's lives. She adds that these women may return to Earth to torment children just like *La Llorona*. If mothers who struggle to survive at childbirth become butterflies, then, obviously, mothers who struggle through abuse must become moths at death. The positive aspects and the beautiful characteristics are attached to those who sacrifice themselves for others, while the negative features belong to those who rebel against the establishment.

Analyzing the two short stories parallel to focusing on how they enter into a dialogue with many other scientific discourses helps provide agency to the elements of nature, which acquire principal roles in the text such as the river or the garden. At the same time, the moths, which are recognized and contemplated as living entities, when exiting the dead human body of the grandmother, they become the free soul of the ancient woman fleeing from her upon her death to inhabit and heal another body, one that is abused and broken by patriarchy and the laws imposed by it. These dialogical encounters prove the need to abound in ecocritical and ecofeminist analyses, to provide meaningful understanding of the reality of oppressed women, traditionally represented as the other in most narratives. As Murphy states, “a dialogic orientation reinforces the ecofeminist recognition of interdependence and the natural need for diversity. This recognition, then, requires a rethinking of the concepts of other and otherness, which have been dominated in contemporary critical theory by psychoanalytic rather than ecological constructs” (22-23).

Similar to Malinche, who interpreted for Cortés the language of the Aztecs and became “la lengua,” Abuelita and her granddaughter in “The Moths,” as well as Felice and Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering Creek,” translate the language of nature initiating a new dialogue, a new conversational relationship between women and the elements of

the surrounding environment. For example, La Gritona creek is a river named after a woman and connected to La Llorona, one of the most empowered and revisited figures of Chicana/o folklore. If we follow Rebolledo's theory of La Llorona's children being lost through assimilation to Anglo culture, under the light of ecofeminism, we must add that these children are also lost due to their lack of communication with nature and the loss of their bonds with their land of origin and their place of birth. Chicana/o children are not only lost through assimilation or loss, but also separated from the mother after she fulfills her nurturing duties; they are taken into a patriarchal world, where they belong to the father as many children from postcolonial nations. In this sense, Gayatri Spivak makes a relevant critique of Marxist postulates, stating that Marxism mainly focuses on the relations of production and forgets about most work undergone by women. Spivak discusses the ways in which women's labor has been undermined by patriarchal societies, relating to both domestic and professional labor. Thus, in "Feminism and Critical Theory," Spivak criticizes Marx on how women's labor has been undervalued in history, how domestic work has remained unpaid and taken for granted. The womb has been considered as a workshop in which "the man retains legal property rights over the product of the woman's body" (Spivak 57). This results in an imbalance since a "woman in the traditional social situation produces more than she is getting in terms of her subsistence, and therefore is a continual source of the production of surpluses, for the man who owns her or by the man for the capitalist who owns his labor power" (Spivak 56). To add insult to injury, Spivak states that women experience the alienation of their product from labor since the children they give birth to automatically belong to the father and obtain his last name, which means they are disconnected from their mothers socially and the mothers cannot benefit from such product.

In fact, Felice makes a statement in "Woman Hollering Creek" about how masculine names are attached to the positive elements of the environment, following the Adamic function of naming<sup>2</sup>, while negative aspects of humanity are associated with women and receive female appellatives to denigrate them: "Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she is the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin" (55). Along the history of humanity, men have been considered as reference for everything: "Thus woman is constructed as the Other, as the exception, the aberration or the subsumed, and man treated as the primary model" (Plumwood 32). Women in "The Moths" have no names; the narrator does not provide any, thus, emphasizing their lack of relevance in society, but also their need to create an identity of their own. They are only recognized by their family links: mother and grandmother. Cisneros, purposely, names her characters in "Woman Hollering Creek" after the feelings they experience. The emotional load that embodies their identities results in the binary opposition of "man vs woman" that assigns reasoning, as a positive value, to "man" and feelings, with negative connotations, to "woman." Thus, Felice experiences happiness in all her acts, Dolores suffers deep pain and sorrow, Soledad is

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the "Genesis," the first book of *The Bible*, Adam, the first man created by God, named the rest of the elements of Creation before Eve was created (18-23).

completely alone and Cleófilas reminds the reader of the lack of sexual enjoyment the poor girl accumulates in her marriage. Associated with the clitoris, the organ of maximum pleasure for a woman, her name constitutes a sad irony for her: a young woman who lives deprived of any kind of enjoyment.

With Felice's triumphant cry after she rescues Cleófilas from her husband, Cisneros subverts the negative connotations of the river in its association with La Llorona. While Juan Pedro laughs at the name and ridicules *el arroyo de la Gritona* as a victim of his Chicano tradition, Felice empowers the creek when she hollers. She also contests normative heterosexuality in "Woman Hollering Creek" since it is a lesbian who finally helps Cleófilas escape her asphyxiating marriage. Through Felice's actions, both the river and Cleófilas will acquire agency and become liberated from their oppression by Juan Pedro. Anzaldúa, Spivak and many other Chicana and postcolonial researchers criticize heterosexual normativity and the example of the nuclear family. As an ecofeminist, Plumwood explains that she (a woman) lacks independent, ethical weight, being valued as a means to others' ends in the family rather than accorded value in her own right, deriving her social worth, instrumentally, from service to others as a producer of sons, carer for parents, etc. (105). This is exactly the case in both short stories. Women are treated as instruments and defined for their nurturing function in the family: on the one hand, as property to be used and abused at one's pleasure and, on the other, as care takers. Thus, the granddaughter in "The Moths" accepts willingly the task of taking care of her grandmother, a woman that has healed and protected her before, avoiding, at least momentarily, the physical abuse that the former generations have been enduring for years:

Abuelita had pulled me through the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices on the temples of my forehead; she had seen me through several whippings, an arm broken by a dare-jump off Tío Enrique's toolshed, puberty, and my first lie. Really, I told Amá, it was only fair. (27)

It is clear, then, that family represents another type of constriction for these women in the process of liberation. At the end of the two short stories, the reader contemplates that the most effective dialogue is the one established between women: the expression of sorority, the solidarity built among them, and the links they develop and maintain with nature. They all become vexed women because of the refusal to submit or subordinate, but they find pride in this rebellion and feed the sense of identity they acquire, which is deeply committed to the land. The voices of this community of women can be heard from these texts and from nature: philosophy, literature, activism and culture enter a successful dialogue to overcome oppression and submission. The first predicament is defeated and the second is confronted with the acquisition of agency for both women and the symbolic use of the elements of nature as portrayed in the stories.

Human inequality is based on the establishment of relations of production and reproduction through which the female gender is exploited in order to obtain a profit. Oppressed women surpass the limits of the conditions and relations of human reproduction. When looking after nature and each other, women finally find a territory where their value does not reside in their capacity for reproduction. As Plumwood states, "It is not only women who have been damaged and oppressed by assimilation to the sphere of nature, but also western culture itself which has been deformed by its masculinization and denial of the sphere associated with women" (30).

Both Helena María Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros succeed in establishing dialogical, ecofeminist narratives in which their protagonists find liberation from patriarchal abuse and the hierarchization of society that renders women as inferior to men. Their release from bondage is achieved through the development of their ability to establish dialogical connections with the surrounding environment and with the construction of new bonds between women and nature. They have learned how men oppress women and nature equally, so escape becomes possible only through the awareness towards the need to protect and care for the environment and through the relationships that are established with one another, with animal and plant species as well as with other elements of nature. For example, freedom and relief help Cleófilas find her voice and develop agency next to Felice. Both the presence of another woman and the vision of the creek predict a happy ending for her and her children far from the abuse of her husband. Cleófilas' happiness achieves its full expression in the final words of the story, when her laughter announces new beginnings, and at the same time Cisneros identifies the female presence in the *arroyo*: "Pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, Felice had said. Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn't Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water" (56).

### Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1986.
- Cisneros, Sandra. "Woman Hollering Creek." *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Vintage Books, 1991, pp. 43-56.
- Cordova, Cary. "Oral History Interview with Santa Barraza." *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, 21-22 Nov. 2003, [www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-santa-barraza-13254#transcript](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-santa-barraza-13254#transcript). Accessed 30 May 2019.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, edited by Martha Albertson Fineman and Rixanne Mykitiuk, Routledge, 1994, pp. 93-118.
- Murphy, Patrick. *Literature, Nature, Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*. State U of New York P, 1995.
- Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.

- Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *Women Singing in the Snow*. The U of Arizona P, 1995.
- Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. *Feminism on the Border*. U of California P, 2000.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Feminism and Critical Theory." *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak by Gayatri Spivak*, edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, Routledge, 1996, pp. 53-74.
- The New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011, [www.usccb.org/bible/index.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/bible/index.cfm). Accessed 30 May 2019.
- Viramontes, Helena María. "The Moths." *The Moths and Other Stories*, Arte Público Press, 1995, pp. 32-38.